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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA SCENESETTER FOR CODEL ENGEL (JANUARY 7-10)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (SBU) Your upcoming visit to Cartagena and Monteria is an opportunity to discuss with the Colombians our shared fight against illegal drugs and illegal armed groups as well as the underlying social inequality that drives both phenomena. President Uribe's final decision on whether to push for reelection remains the central chord of Colombian politics and will define the tone of congressional elections in March and the presidential elections in May. Bilateral relations with Colombia remain solid but will be tested by our handling of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the regional sensitivities to our Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). Despite improving performance on human rights throughout Plan Colombia, there are continuing abuses and potential for backsliding. Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations bear a disproportionate share of violence, social exclusion and poverty. After rousing success against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2008, progress against the guerrilla organization has plateaued. The recent kidnapping and assassination of a departmental governor demonstrated that the FARC still have the capability to carry out successful operations against high-profile targets. There are few prospects for peace in the near term. Post has begun implementing the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) -- the logical evolution of Plan Colombia -- with greater focus on expanding state services in Colombia's ungoverned spaces where illegal armed groups and the illicit economy flourish. End Summary.

COLOMBIA IN TRANSITION

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¶2. (SBU) Embassy Bogota welcomes the visit of House Foreign Affairs Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Chairman Eliot Engel and delegation to Colombia on January 7-10, 2010. In the past ten years, Colombia has transitioned from a near failed state and terrorist haven to a stable democracy. Murder and kidnapping rates have dropped dramatically, while the rule of law has been strengthened through major judicial reforms. While Colombia still experiences serious problems with illegal armed groups, the conflict has ceased to be a threat to Colombia's national security and sovereignty.

¶3. (SBU) Colombia's turnaround can be attributed to improvements in overall security, but further progress depends on resolving chronic

issues such as social inequality and land tenure. Colombia has made significant inroads in confronting narco-terrorism but drug trafficking organizations and illegal armed groups, often with ties to guerillas and organized crime, still operate in large parts of the country, including along borders.

¶4. (SBU) Colombia has been feeling the effects of the global economic crisis, though the impact has been lessened by conservative lending practices coupled with sound fiscal and monetary policies that have attracted foreign investment. Growth rates for 2009 are expected to be close to zero, but the GOC predicts 2.5% growth next year. Poverty rates have also decreased, though unemployment remains a major problem. About 60% of the economy remains mired in the informal sector.

#### REELECTION AND ELECTIONS

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¶5. (SBU) The Colombian Congress passed a law in September permitting a referendum on whether President Alvaro Uribe may stand for a third term in the presidential elections on May 30, 2010. The Constitutional Court must now rule on the referendum process and its impact on the Constitution, a decision that may not come

until March 2010. If the referendum does go forward, 25% of registered voters (currently about 7.47 million) must participate with the majority of those voting in favor of reelection; current polls suggest Uribe would win in this scenario. Uribe seldom speaks publicly of the referendum, characterizing it as a grassroots initiative of Colombian citizens. His popularity remains between 65% and 70% after more than seven years in office. Should Uribe decide against running again, there are strong but far less popular candidates who could replace him such as former Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos or opposition Senator Gustavo Petro. Elections to replace the entire Congress (166 Representatives and 102 Senators) will be held on March 14.

#### BILATERAL AND REGIONAL RELATIONS

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¶6. (SBU) Colombia has been a staunch U.S. ally against the threats of narco-trafficking and terrorism. We continue to enjoy a robust extradition relationship, though the Supreme Court in 2009 denied requests to extradite the FARC operatives charged with taking hostage or attempting to harm U.S. citizens. Colombia is our fourth largest export market in the region and a growing destination for U.S. investment. Our close relations have made Colombia a target of criticism from some leaders in the region, especially after the signing of the DCA. The GOC has begun to patch up diplomatic relations with Ecuador which were severed following the Colombia's March 2008 military strike against FARC leader Raul Reyes in Ecuador. The Colombians have also recently engaged in "security diplomacy," providing training and assistance to neighbors (such as Mexico and Haiti) suffering from drug trafficking and organized crime as well as a possible deployment to Afghanistan.

#### VENEZUELA ON THE MIND

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¶7. (SBU) Colombian officials worry that Venezuela poses a growing

military, economic, and covert threat. The GOC has sounded alarms in response to Venezuela's arms purchases, all but open support for the FARC, and bellicose rhetoric--including Chavez' statements to "prepare for war" and refusal to meet with Uribe in Brazilian brokered talks. Caracas has blocked imports from Colombia, leading to border area confrontations and unrest. Bilateral trade, once thought to be of sufficient volume to prevent bilateral conflict, has fallen dramatically since August. November figures show a 75 percent decrease in Colombian exports to Venezuela year-on-year. Despite the increased rhetoric, we see no evidence that either side is actively preparing for hostilities. However, as tensions along the border rise and perceptions skew, there is a small risk that a local incident could spiral out of control. Real or not, the perception of the threat posed by Venezuela has changed Colombia's worldview, causing them to seek ever greater assurances of our friendship and support.

#### TRADE PROMOTION AND LABOR VIOLENCE

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18. (SBU) While Colombians generally understand U.S. political realities associated with a vote on the FTA, frustration has grown within the government, business and academic communities over the lack of action on the accord. The GOC remains committed to the agreement's passage, but worries that its efforts will turn out to be unsuccessful. Business community members believe that long-term inaction on the FTA will be detrimental to U.S.-Colombian relations. The majority of organized labor is opposed to free trade agreements and argues that the GOC needs to do more to respect worker rights and to protect unionists from violence. In 2009, 39 unionists were murdered as of December 15, which is less than the 49 murders in all of 2008. President Uribe publicly

adheres to the commitment President Obama made in their June 29 meeting to move the FTA forward in the U.S. Congress once labor and human rights issues are adequately addressed.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS

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19. (SBU) By nearly all measures, the human rights situation in Colombia has improved over the last ten years. Serious human rights concerns remain, however, especially with regard to the Colombian army. Last year's exposure of military "false positives," in which unarmed civilians were murdered and presented as combat deaths, led to the dismissal of 51 members of the Colombian Army. We are concerned about the military's lukewarm commitment to investigating these types of cases and its cooperation with the Prosecutor General's office. The Prosecutor General's Office is currently processing more than 1,000 cases of extrajudicial executions; prosecutions have been slow but there is progress. We are working with the Colombian military to improve their respect for human rights as they carry out security operations. Impunity for human rights violations and past crimes carried out by paramilitary and guerrilla groups is a serious problem. NGOs complain that the GOC regularly paints them as supporters of terrorist organizations, which in turn fuels growing death threats against them. Revelations that Colombian intelligence and law enforcement entities carried out illegal surveillance against human rights groups, unionists and political opponents have also undermined the GOC's credibility on human rights. Colombia has more than three million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

#### AFRO-COLOMBIAN AND INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

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¶10. (SBU) Colombia's populations of Afro-descendants (between 11 and 20 percent of the population) and indigenous (between one and three percent of the population) suffer from discrimination, social exclusion, structural poverty, and lack of political participation. This marginalization allows illicit drug cultivation or trafficking to move into the communities, subjecting them to a disproportionate share of violence and displacement. The GOC created the Commission for the Advancement of Afro-Colombians to help improve education, income generation, and political representation within the Afro-Colombian population. However, the Colombian congress has not passed legislation to implement the commission's recommendations. The Embassy has implemented special programs to help Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations realize greater participation in the political and economic life of the country. Cartagena's charismatic and dynamic mayor is Afro-Colombian and her rise reflects grass roots efforts to increase Afro-Colombian political participation that we have nurtured. Recognizing the need for increased participation and integration of Afro-Colombians and African descendants worldwide, Colombia presented to the UN an initiative proclaiming 2011 as International Year for People of African descent, which was approved with unanimous consent.

CONFLICT STALLED, PEACE DELAYED

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¶11. (SBU) The GOC made significant progress against the FARC in 2008: the deaths of three Secretariat members, the liberation of 15 prized hostages, including three Americans, and record high desertions. Progress in 2009 has, however, been mixed. The December kidnapping and assassination of the governor of Caqueta Department marked the highest profile political kidnapping by the FARC since 2002. The FARC also continue to carry out asymmetrical attacks on selective soft targets as the Colombian military tries to grind them down in a slow war of attrition. Any significant progress towards peace seems unlikely until after the elections; we

expect the guerrilla groups to wait to see whether Uribe will be reelected before considering a broader peace process.

THE COLOMBIA STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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¶12. (SBU) To consolidate the gains of Plan Colombia, we have developed the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which meshes with Colombia's own National Consolidation Plan (PNC). Our efforts initially focus on four priority zones of ongoing conflict, drug trafficking and social marginalization. PNC/CSDI has prioritized addressing the lack of state presence that enables coca production and illegal armed groups, and seeks to establish state presence in strategic, under-governed parts of the country. The plan is centered on increasing territorial control in these areas to provide security for communities, to achieve permanent coca eradication, to transfer security responsibility to the police, to provide a wide range of socio-economic services to address the root causes of marginalization, and to improve the justice sector to strengthen the rule of law. A major challenge to implementation is achieving strong, effective civilian leadership of the PNC. The head of Social Action (Accion Social), Colombia's development agency, is the titular head of the PNC effort. Civilian agencies have been reluctant, however, to devote their budgets to the effort, often leaving the Ministry of Defense organizationally in front. Other obstacles include the need for a comprehensive GOC security strategy to transition from military to police in "consolidated" territories, more clarity on a post-eradication

strategy, stronger presence of the justice sector in CSDI areas, and increased funding support for PNC ministries in the GOC budget.

#### CARTAGENA AND COCAINE

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¶13. (SBU) Developments in Cartagena will play a major role in Colombia's future. In the Montes de Maria zone near Cartagena, where state security has been reestablished following a long period of lawlessness, the effectiveness of our CSDI efforts will likely become evident within the next year. At the same time, with drug traffickers moving seaborne shipments of drugs in go-fast boats, self-propelled semi-submersible boats, or hidden in commercial cargo, maritime counter-narcotics interdiction, with Caribbean coastal operations based out of Cartagena, will be ever more vital to our efforts to combat drug trafficking. Our joint efforts with the Colombian Navy had unparalleled success in 2009, with record seizures of cocaine on the high seas, which coupled with a significant year in eradication led to double digit increases in the price of cocaine in the United States and decreases in its purity.

#### CONSTERNATION OVER CORRUPTION IN THE NAVY

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¶14. (SBU) A high profile narco-corruption case against a retired rear admiral was recently dismissed amidst controversy. Guillermo Arango Bacci was forced to retire in 2007 based on evidence that he had conspired with drug traffickers to help them evade U.S. and Colombian interdiction patrols. Colombian Navy Commander Admiral Guillermo Barrera took the additional step of referring Arango Bacci's case to the civilian Prosecutor General's Office for criminal charges; the case was nearing a guilty verdict by mid-2009. On November 3, however, a new prosecutor assigned to the case petitioned the Supreme Court to absolve Arango Bacci on grounds that the investigation failed to prove the admiral's guilt. The Court granted the petition and have called for an investigation of Admiral Barrera and other Navy officers for allegedly smearing Admiral Arango Bacci. The Ambassador publicly lauded Barrera for having brought the corruption case to light.

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